

AUTHOR OF LIBERTY

July 1, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Matthew 10:34-42

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

..."where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

-2 Corinthians 3:17 (RSV)

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

On April 30, 1789, President-Elect George Washington, took the oath of office as the first President of the United States, on the balcony of Federal Hall, at Broad and Wall Streets, New York City. He added the phrase "So help me God" to the oath, leaned down and kissed the Bible, walked inside to the Senate chambers and delivered his inaugural address. He said:

"The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are... finally staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

The "sacred fire of liberty." It was only a decade ago that journalists and commentators were lamenting the steady increase in totalitarianism and tyranny of the right and left throughout the world, and the consequent diminishment of liberty. Things were not going well for freedom, it was said.

But think of what has happened. Think of what happened in the past twelve months. Most of us have lived most of our lives in a world divided between West and East, democracy and communism, freedom and tyranny. It was a world defined by a forty-year-old cold war, by refugees fleeing and sometimes dying in the process in order to gain artistic, economic, religious, political, personal freedom; a world defined perhaps most eloquently by the profound ugliness of the Berlin Wall. Think of it; think of those stunning news photos of East Germans dismantling the wall with their own hands, pictures of families reunited, old friends embracing, strangers with tears streaming down their faces exchanging flowers, and Check Point Charlie, a harmless hut, hanging precariously from a crane on its way to the dump; pictures of people going to the polls in Warsaw, holding candles in Wenceslas Square in Prague, joining hands around the manse in Timisoara, Romania; pictures of politicians debating and people

streaming into churches in Moscow and Leningrad: pictures of students in Tiananmen Square with their styrofoam goddess of liberty and one lone individual for one moment, captured forever in our memories, halting a column of battle-ready tanks.

"Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." The sacred fire, to which George Washington referred, is burning brightly throughout the world.

Sometimes the pictures have been uncomfortable: Palestinians throwing rocks at the Israeli occupiers, South African blacks beating collaborators. And sometimes the issue of freedom and individual rights has been downright distressing. Nelson Mandella, dignified, courageous, his very survival through twenty-seven years of imprisonment a testimony to the power of human freedom, invoking the memory and words of Martin Luther King, and reminding us that there was a time when Americans knew they had to struggle and contend and fight and sacrifice and sometimes die for freedom.

Or even more distressing, the art that offends the sensibilities of many, the flag - the symbol of this precious flame of liberty, itself burned as an expression of the very liberty it symbolizes.

It has been quite a year in terms of the fortunes of liberty. And as the nation - as we - prepare to celebrate the political manifestation of liberty on our Independence Day, it seemed to me appropriate to revisit the very important topic of the meaning of Christian freedom and its relationship to political freedom. Political freedom does not exist in the abstract. It is rooted in a philosophic, sometimes theological premise about the nature of our humanness and, for believers, that's religion.

Some would argue that freedom is what the Bible is about. It is surely a major theme. The first thing the Bible says about human beings is that we are free: unlike the other creatures, the primal man and woman are free to name things, enjoy things, decide things, make choices, including as it turns out, some bad ones. They, man and woman, together, bear within them the image of God. They are free and responsible for their own lives, their destiny and the care of the garden. These creatures are more than creatures, less than God - they are God's free sons and daughters.

That's the first thing the Bible says about us. And the first thing the Bible says about God is that God is the author of freedom. God creates these people like this, creates them free, wants them to be free. God would rather have children who are disobedient, but free, than perfectly obedient children who are not free. Freedom, apparently, is very important to the Creator. Before the story proceeds very far, God's people are in slavery in Egypt and God hears their cries and decides to set them free. God the libertator: it happens again as they get themselves mired in Babylonian captivity and God hears their lament and works for their liberation.

Their law included a promise that every fifty years liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land and all debts were to be cancelled.

Later God's son would say, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free," not holy, pure, righteous or theologically orthodox; not Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian, but free. And that man's most vigorous proponent, Paul, would keep returning to the notion of freedom as a metaphor for what God had done. In Jesus Christ we are free to become children of God. For freedom Christ has set us free. Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And so the people who have thought systematically about Christian faith have always returned to the notion of freedom. In Christ we are free. Free from what? Free from sin, free from guilt, free from fear, free from everything that oppresses and inhibits, from anxiety about our adequacy, our value as persons, our ultimate destiny, free to become all we can become.

St. Paul described two enemies of freedom: the limiting of individual freedom by political or religious authorities, and the abuse of freedom by individuals who use it for the pursuit of selfish ends. The categories, 2,000 years old, are as relevant as this morning's newspaper.

The late Walter Lippmann observed one time that "a man's worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes." It is simply easier to be told what to do, how to behave, what is right and wrong, than it is to figure it out for oneself. In Paul's world, religion did that. Paul was a Pharisee, an expert on the law of Moses which had evolved over time into more than 600 religious rules governing all of life. The following of those rules became the way a man or woman practiced religion - which, if you assume God really wants people to be free and responsible, is a peculiar and tragic development. That's why Paul, at first, was such a vigorous opponent of the religion of Jesus. It threatened his religion, his world view. And it's why later, after his conversion to Christianity, freedom became his favorite topic. In Christ you are free - free to love and serve God - free from the law, in fact, free to make responsible choices, free to be mature members of God's family, no longer slaves.

That's the basis of the Protestant witness: we are created to be free; there is no political nor religious structure for us which can abrogate individual freedom. Cardinal Ratzinger announced last week that it is not appropriate for church theologians to challenge and criticize church dogma in public. The church, he announced, is not a democratic institution. And both Catholic and Protestant theologians flinched. It's what Galatians is all about. It is the job of Christian intellectuals, Christian thinkers, always to challenge and question the structures, religious as well as political. It is what it means to be free and responsible children of God.

But it's easier to be told what is right and wrong: what to do and what not to do. George Gallup reported recently that religion that takes clear and simple positions on complicated ethical questions is going to be popular in the future. And so on the very complex questions of abortion, and the right to die with dignity, the most authoritarian Christians, Catholic and Protestant, people who because of their positions have been arguing vehemently for 450 years, suddenly find themselves allies. Cardinal O'Connor and Jerry Falwell spoke at the same rally this weekend.

The responsibility to exercise the legacy of freedom is not easy. And sometimes religion and religious institutions provide a way to avoid it. A powerful expression of that dynamic is the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov. The legend takes place in Seville in the sixteenth century. One hundred heretics have been burned in the town square. The Grand Inquisitor has presided. Jesus comes to the city; the Grand Inquisitor has him arrested and thrown in prison. That night the old man visits Jesus in his cell. They talk. The churchman says "Did you not say 'I will make you free?' Yes, we've paid dearly for it... For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with your freedom, but now it is ended, over for good. You gave them a promise of freedom which in their simplicity and natural unruliness they cannot even understand, which they fear and dread - for nothing has ever been more unsupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born."

Commenting on that passage, philosopher and psychotherapist, Rollo May wrote:

"to take away freedom, the church must take charge of the human conscience, appease it, and relieve men and women from the burden of good and evil."

[Freedom & Destiny, p. 68-71]

Kenneth Vaux, professor of Ethics at the University of Illinois Medical School, Presbyterian clergyman, occasional editorialist in the Tribune said last Thursday that the Supreme Court two times on the same day, removed the freedom of choice from individuals and families and gave it to the state. In the case of terminally ill patients, who are being sustained in a vegetative state by artificial means, it took from loved ones and families and pastors and physicians the right to decide and gave it to the courts. In the case of an adolescent girl, raped by her own father, or her mother's boyfriend, it ruled that the youngster had to inform a parent, or appear before a judge before exercising the right to terminate the resultant pregnancy.

In a time of moral confusion and complexity, it is tempting to hand over freedom to the courts, the church, the TV preachers, the lawyers. It is almost always a mistake. The enemy of freedom, but also the enemy of right religion defined by St. Paul is authoritarianism, tyranny, legalism. "For freedom Christ has set us free - do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" he wrote.

The second enemy of freedom is the exact opposite - license, libertarianism, doing what you want to do for no reason other than you want to do it. Extend a little freedom and people will abuse it. Tell them they are free of the shackles of the law and they'll start sleeping around and getting drunk on communion wine and calling it Christian liberty. It's as old as the argument itself. John Calvin, father of Presbyterianism, was a sixteenth century humanist philosopher who, when he began to think about Christianity, joined the Reformation and became the proponent of Christian liberty. There are three components of Christian liberty Calvin said:

"freedom of conscience, freedom to obey God and freedom with respect to things that are not in themselves essential - to laugh, to play, to add new possessions to the old and inherited ones, to delight in concert music, or to drink wine," [see Foundation of American Freedom, A. Mervyn Davies, p. 29]

That passage always surprises me with its gentleness and grace because Calvin is better known for an almost dictatorial sense of political propriety. In fact, later in life, he had soured on liberty, had become harsh and authoritarian. What happened was that the people of Geneva had laughed too hard and had drunk too much wine and Calvin never again fully trusted his early libertarian tendencies.

So it goes... we have a first amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression. People abuse it. People paint offensive pictures, distasteful pictures, silly pictures; people say offensive things in speeches, on records, in concerts. People walk on the flag, burn the flag, but they also wrap themselves in it even as they advocate the restricting of the freedom the flag represents. People also put flags on napkins, garbage bags, underwear, and we are always tempted to deal with the abuse of freedom by limiting the freedom itself.

But that's not really the enemy of freedom and gratefully most people seem to know that even when the politicians don't. The final enemy of freedom is theological. Paul called it sin. If that makes you queasy, try a synonym- selfishness, self-centeredness. When Paul warns the Galatians not to use their freedom as an "opportunity for the flesh," he is not thinking only of sexuality. What he means is selfishness: living out of your own wants and desires only. That's simply another form of bondage, another way of relinquishing our essential freedom.

Distinguished American Historian Henry Steele Commager once warned that if freedom dies in our nation, the reason will not be an invasion from a hostile nation but the growth of hedonism and materialism.

The whole co-dependence movement has alerted us to the fact that the freedom to do what you want, to do your own thing, is itself another form of slavery. And so after a decade or so of indulging ourselves, a ten year binge of narcissism, America now knows about addiction to drugs and alcohol; there are co-dependent groups for work addiction, sex addiction, addiction to relationships that make us co-dependent and not free.

"Paul's basic contention is that Christianity is the good news of the liberation of the human spirit from all the forces that seek to enslave it. A Christian, for Paul, is a man or woman who has committed life to Jesus Christ, acknowledging him as Savior and Lord... and so there can be no other absolute requirement." [William Neil, Cambridge Bible Commentary]

In Christ we are free to love and serve others, he proposed: not simply free to do whatever we want to do, but free to discover our highest and best self in the service of God and humanity. That's the critical difference: freedom for something; for love and science which is our highest and best humanity.

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Haven't you experienced it? How in the context of a disciplined commitment you become authentically yourself, authentically free?

There is perhaps no more eloquent example of the loveliness of freedom than a graceful ballet dancer, who with utter fluidity of motion captures the mystery of art and music and body and yet - there is no activity more demanding, more disciplined; or the grace and fluidity of Michael Jordan and Scott Pippin at the front of a fast break, who have practiced it over and over and know exactly the capacity and limits of their own bodies. Freedom results from absolute commitment and dedication. If we learned anything from the "if it feels good, do it" school of ethics, it was that hit and run sex is not freeing at all, but a kind of demeaning servitude: that authentic human sexual freedom is a product of love and devotion and commitment.

We are, in fact, most human when we are free. And we are, in fact, most free, when we submit self to the love and service of others. Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl wrote:

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedom - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." [See A Rumor of Angels, p. 8]

We are most human when we are free. We are most thoroughly children of God as we exercise the prerogatives and responsibilities of that blessed freedom.

Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, St. Paul wrote - or:

Author of liberty - to thee we sing.

We are grateful, O God, for our freedom: political and personal. Make us strong to protect it, preserve and practice it; through Jesus our Lord, in whom is perfect freedom. Amen.